

The Desert is Itself the Spring We Need

The Heart Sutra is one of the most foundational Mahayana Buddhist texts, often called the essence of Buddhism. It gives us that religion's central tenets, emphasizing the achievement of enlightenment to liberate all beings rather than solely oneself – in poetry that we chant.

In a new translation, Roshi Joan Halifax and Kazuaki Tanahashi translate the more familiar concept of “emptiness” as “boundlessness.”

“Form is not separate from boundlessness, boundlessness is not separate from form / form is not other than boundlessness boundlessness is not other than form / the same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness...”

I love the Lenten season. And most especially that it starts with Jesus intentionally going into the desert not only to face temptations but to lose his Self – to fast, pray, and realize his own boundlessness in the relentless emptiness of his surroundings.

Maybe it is because I am Catholic, or maybe as a person long in love with the notion of “radical,” or going to the root of things, I hunger to enter the desert of both discernment and repentance.

I yearn for every one of us to have opportunities for metanoia – the Greek concept for fundamental change of mind – in which repentance is rooted.

Repentance represents a total reversal of direction from sin toward God, acknowledging not only what we have done but what we have failed to do. What I, and we, fail to do every day. A shift from the self-justifications of our ego-selves to a heartbreak named God that produces not the self-centered, useless emotion of guilt, but rather an actual change in our behaviors and actions.

Repentance is humbling, and this humility is the pre-condition for asking for and receiving forgiveness.

From my perspective, we need a lot more repentance, forgiveness, and mercy in our dominant, white U.S. culture.

And not just from or for those who use their powers to treat others badly.

We need forgiveness from and for each other, who in our quests for comfort, convenience, and a sense of security fail to do enough.

Boundlessness describes the reality that we are all the same cells, all breathing the same air; that these impermanent physical forms we currently take are, as Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck might say, “nothing special,” no-thing. Just here, now, for our particular purposes.

In its lack of distractions, we recognize the desert’s boundlessness and hopefully our own, wishing as we do at times, especially when ill or otherwise circumscribed by our bodies, that like Shakespeare’s Hamlet this “too too solid flesh would melt.”

The Desert is Itself the Spring We Need.

Here in the U.S., our culture of consumption seems often to have swallowed up our very understanding of the model and teachings of the Christ. We are encumbered by our attachments to so many things, to so much STUFF – as well as to the notion that we are entitled to it all as long as we “work hard.”

We need to do some spiritual Swedish death cleaning, as it were, to make conscious – to discern – our true purposes here and to change our actions.

We need the desert emptiness just as Jesus did, for fasting and praying, to burn away all that is unnecessary and get to what is real. Not individual egos but god’s beloved sons, god’s beloved daughters, god’s beloved children, each with our purpose here.

Here in the desert’s boundlessness we realize our dream of a better world, where there is no separation between you and me, between me and that blade of grass, between me and that piano – or between us and god.

When I was 14 in 1975, I first cast myself into the desert of exile.

I received my confirmation from the Catholic Bishop of Norwich, CT, then promptly stopped attending church.

I already knew that as a young queer woman I was exiled by this church, in which women could not be leaders and homosexuals were condemned sinners – but I wanted the choice to be my own.

My mother cried. My godmother rejected me.

I was still too young, then, to understand that living gracefully and mercifully with suffering and contradictions is the heart of Jesus’s messages and actions.

And neither my family nor our weekly CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) classes did anything to help me better understand Jesus’s complex lessons.

As young Catholics, we were taught only to obey the rules, and to follow.

But follow what?

Had I better understood Matthew 4:1-11, in which the baptismal spirit leads Jesus into the desert wilderness to overcome the temptations of his suffering, I might have grown more productively within my own exile.

But I was a white U.S. teenager. I suffered in isolation, surliness and – rebellion.

Father Richard Rohr recently quoted professor Rachel Wheeler on the desert: “The desert occupies a powerful place at the heart of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic spiritual traditions. Simultaneously, the desert is a place of resistance, refuge, and revelation...Many men and women, who came to be known as desert fathers and mothers, experienced the wilderness as a refuge from an empire increasingly inhospitable to them.... Its association with the powerful and wealthy was inconsistent with how many desert mothers and fathers believed they ought to live out their Christian calling.”

We go to the desert to peel away the layers of abundance that cloud our minds and hearts. To step to the side, to allow god to lead.

The world’s suffering, and our suffering with and for it, is our “desert” only when it causes us to step away from our selves, away from abundance and comfort, to ask for forgiveness for all we have done, for all we have failed to do – and then to act.

How do we take up our crosses?

I was a radical lesbian feminist living as a writer and editor in New York City in the midst of the AIDS holocaust of the 1980’s and 1990’s.

My friends, peers, and colleagues were becoming horribly sick and dying around me, every day.

The Reagan Administration refused to acknowledge the AIDS crisis.

We were again cast into an unmerciful and deadly exile.

Silence = Death.

In the midst of this I followed some of my fellow feminist activists from the streets of ACT UP and into a simultaneous Zen practice.

Sitting on the cushion, I learned to identify the stories to which my mind was attracted and attached, and then practiced letting those go. This has helped me to have compassion for those who would deny our existence, as well as the courage and love to act with purpose.

Mercy for those whose words and actions would kill us. Action to change it.

I was still very angry. I am still very angry. And again, not only at failed leadership.

My anger burns for how so many of us, myself included, choose daily to participate in a culture that robs so many of their basic human dignity.

Once a year, my mother would take the train from Mystic to the city to visit me for Mothers' Day.

My mom was born in 1923 and was defined by growing up in a family of Bohemian and German immigrants through the Great Depression. She had a high school education, multiple eye operations and a full hysterectomy at age 17. When she finally met and was accepted by my functionally deaf, first generation father, they adopted me. She was already 39.

She gifted her Catholic faith and values to me. It took me two decades to go back to church, to face the institution that, similarly to the Reagan administration, was determined that a woman like me could not exist.

Very few of us wish to venture where we are not wanted.

But Zen had taught me how to enter into my own boundlessness.

And entering into that boundlessness, I was at last able to understand the Old Testament's prophets and the lived example of Jesus.

During one visit, my mom and I were passing by a beautiful Catholic church on 6th Avenue in Park Slope. I had poked my head in – I missed the magical smells and sounds and silences of my youth – and discovered it to be the worship home of Haitian refugees.

I told my mom I had tentatively started to return to Mass.

She was quiet until we reached the corner by the bodega whose cafe con leches and plantanos I craved.

I don't go any more, she said softly.

Remembering how tortured I had felt in my youth, being awakened early to get to Mass and forced into religious education classes with priests I actively considered assholes, I was pretty sure I had misheard her. I asked her to repeat herself.

I don't go any more, she said. You're right, in what you write. The church is just made by men, men who change the rules. Whether or not to wear a hat. Whether or not to eat meat on Friday's. Those are men's rules, not god's.

God is in my raspberry patch.

We stood there on the Brooklyn sidewalk, the current of languages and colors swirling around us.

Together, my mom and I were able to step aside from the rules of men and re-connect with the profound faith and humility with which she had always lived.

Connect to an understanding that we do our best work when we are able to step to the side, centering not our Selves, but boundlessness.

Connect to a faith that god is best found in our raspberry patches, because we ourselves are no different from that thorny bush, or that delicious fruit.

It is actually not that difficult to practice both Catholicism and Zen Buddhism as they share an important core paradox: that we must live in and through suffering to find heaven.

As Christians, we know this as Jesus dying on the cross and then rising to new life.

As Buddhists, we know that trying to escape from inconvenience, discomfort, accumulated habits and assumptions, conflict, exile and death only deepens suffering.

In our boundlessness, there is no separation between suffering and love.

This Lent, how are we each entering and embracing the place that makes discernment possible? What actions are we taking to de-center ourselves and our own experiences?

Zen master Shunryu Suzuki famously said: *"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."*

I am writing this in part during the eclipse of the full blood moon, with coyotes howling along our shore.

Boundlessness – including the boundlessness of the desert – is the place from which all arises.

The desert itself was Jesus's spring, as it is ours.

In barrenness, in self-imposed hunger and solitude, Jesus experienced his boundlessness and was able to resist the very human temptations that cause us to harm others – which is to sin.

In our boundlessness, we do not live on bread alone. We are more than these physical forms.

In our boundlessness, we do not need to prove our power by testing god.

In our boundlessness, everything is of god and nothing is more important.

The “wisdom beyond wisdom” of the Heart Sutra is realized in the boundlessness of the desert, in which we are nothing special.

As many of you know, when I left New York City more than 25 years ago to return to Maine, I did so to work first in the nonprofit and now in the public sector.

There are always differences of opinion on how to reach shared goals. Always conflict. Always opposition. Too often negativity.

My hope is always, always, to find and serve our common good.

I try to bring my mother's values – of faith in the interconnection of all things, in humility, in not knowing – into my work and fail more often than not.

As Roshi Joan Halifax has said, “Suffering and failure bring us to practice and teach us about our strengths and our interconnectedness with all beings. Our failures can become transformed into understanding and compassion.”

And so we just keep trying.

The desert is itself the spring we need.

Notes

* In my chanting of The Heart Sutra as translated by Tanahashi and Halifax, I substituted the following Christian terms as appropriate:

* I began with “Hail, Mary” rather than “Avalokiteshvara,” who is the bodhisattva associated with compassion and with Mary in the Christian faith.

* I substituted “Beloveds,” familiar to Christians from the Letters of St. Paul, for “Shariputra,” who was one of the Buddha’s two primary disciples.

* I substituted “Amen!” for “Svaha!” as the final word. Svaha is the Sanskrit word with which many Buddhist mantras end, roughly meaning “so be it.”